

## Transactions

\*\*\*\*\*3/21/95\*\*\*\*\*PLEASE LOGON WITH YOUR CODE WORD  
\*\*\*\*\*//caesar

GO AHEAD CAESAR

//my goodness its ten years to the day you started putting up  
with me,,,,,,or so my computer blinks

WHAT IM HERE FOR SIR

//well im all bolloxed up again

ALL RIGHT IRA I DONT HAVE TO LOOK UP I REM THAT AS  
TEN THOUSAND GIVE OR TAKE FEW CENTS CHECKING AS OF YESTERDAY  
CONTAINED FOUR HUNDRED TEN

//oh thats good

REM OUR DISCUSSIONS ABOUT OUTSTANDING CHECKS

//oh yeah god i think there may be one or two

SAVINGS ELEVEN HUNDRED ON THE BUTTON RT ON THE BUTTON  
UNUSUAL

//youre not kidding,,,,well after all these years god youve been  
so helpful,,,wish there was something I could do

NOT AT ALL

//are you there,,,i mean right there in that building where  
bank is hope you can open window,,,springs exploding all  
over

SECOND FLOOR

//i can almost hear your voice even though we just type i can

hear your voice

AND I YOURS I CAN ASSURE YOU CAESAR

//and i can hear you laughing now  
I WOULDN'T

//no i don't mean sarcastic laughing

WELL YOU'RE RIGHT

//for once in the ten years well as I said if there's  
anything anything at all

\*\*\*\*\*THIS PART OF TRANSMISSION ENDED;;;TYPE MORE! FOR  
ADDITIONAL,IMPORTANT INFORMATION\*\*\*\*\*

//more

RESPONSE INCOMPLETE RECHECK ADVICE MESSAGE,,,CAESAR

//more!

WHY DON'T YOU JUST COME DOWN HERE AND SCREW MY SOCKS OFF

//

## Two Documents

Well, Diary, these are the human problems.

H. became very nervous about her daughter's Holy Communion dress, it not being white enough, dressmaker passing off more of a kind of cream color, she felt. (Naughty dressmaker!) So she snapped at L. over a bit of bookkeeping, something L. had always done that way. L. cried, and then I, Uncle Peacemaker, entered the woeful! scene.

But now, my door open a few inches, I'm viewing them in the outer office, backlit and looking ethereal and altogether lovely in the soft light of this Spring afternoon. Ah now! H. is opening the box and showing the dress, and L. assures her that it is quite quite white indeed!--while pouring another cup of tea for both.

The steam, green and glowing, wreathes them round and makes me think that life itself is beautiful however troublesome, at times, our duty. Well, once a romantic...

At any rate, diary, business! I'll let the ladies talk all the more, writing my letter by hand instead of dictating to H.

Dear Dr. G.,

Perhaps you would honor us with another visit. With all respect, I believe the gas to be too slow--I'm not a chemist but suspect the concentration too minimal--or just a faulty batch(?) Please phone to make an appointment. (I write you by hand because my ladies are healing a tiff, and I choose not to interrupt.) Ah the human aspects of our work!

### "No Sexual Intercourse Aloud"

It's a curious guilt, this being amused while knowing better.

At first, I was part of the humoring process, concurred at least. I'll back up. For two or so hours a day I sit in a sunny alcove at a magnificent state library, all marble and aromatic oak, and full of musty, pleasant tradition (the library that is). There I commit research, the subject of which is interesting only to some one hundred experts, so-called, in the world.

We actually meet sometimes and, as human nature would have

it, develop solemn friendships and dark hatreds over immense trivialities frequently in some sinbucket city where we manage looking bemused while terrified. New Orleans was the last place for this hyperstressed voyeurism.

At any rate the particular citizen I laughed at in our coolly moral library was meticulous, richly dressed, aglow in health, and unable to put the simplest thought directly.

A typical verbal dance of his, and there were many...well let him wend his torturous way as he speaks to the chief librarian, a man of some presence, not to say girth. "I need, uh, when a person who has the knowledge and facilities, uh? Is...asked?"

"That would be help, information. Why I'm here." The chief librarian is a florid fellow and one, not surprisingly, of great appetite, who often was eating something or enjoying the memory of it in any case he had looked the latter way that particular afternoon just before the approach by the fidgety, inarticulate one.

And there they remain in memory, surrounded by rosy marble and comprising what the TV boys call a twoshot. But *I* should stick to the subject: "Of course. Where's my...uh, *mind*?" he asks our librarian while fairly tapdancing along the marble floor, black shoes flashing. (Well *I* don't have it, thank the Lord! I think, seesawing on my own feet in front of the card index.) "Anyway, the one fellow... and the other?" he dances on, "Instrument involved. He. The first. Wooden. Though they're metal, uh, aluminum now...some. Not relevant to my...?"

Finally standing still, he begins sweating, his profile a blue shimmer against the rosy marble. "Your question?" smiles the chief librarian, hands on ample hips, and lifting an eyebrow at me as if we two formed a compact of mild toleration against this vague and silly man. It's an idea I don't like didn't like then. A good person, one with courage, will let no one assume he is uncritically going along.

"But not at all levels," this uncertain man plods. "The highest...forbidden. Aluminum, that is." "Uh huh," nods the benign librarian, seeming to increase in girth in his rootedness as this flibbitygadget again begins circling through the dusty slants of sunlight, and firing his asinine comments and questions from all angles. Aluminum indeed! Well, getting the actual question from him was like *digging* aluminum from out of that marble floor.

"I see," says the librarian, his British tweeds deepening in afternoon light perhaps his beginning to "see" in the midst of

the other's verbal and physical dance being a mellow function of his few luncheon Heinikins rather than patient erudition.

Still the doltish wanderer hasn't found his precise ground: "After the striking of one, why then another, uh, of an opposite, uh, faction, has the obligation to to to to to..?"

"To catch...a ball! It's baseball!" the fat librarian affirms.

I'll spare you the five, scraping minutes, with the minor librarians, female all, going in and out of the stacks while shaking their gray heads, until their hearty chief extracts the final question: the career *fielding* average compiled by Babe Ruth.

Hallelleulah--a rare something the fat and florid librarian didn't know outright. He told the dancing bumbler to look in *The Baseball Fact Book*. Of course.

The other performance I remember most, of a rainy, swirling afternoon when autumn leaves plastered the windows:

"Structure... people living in...he'd been Princeton president too...but but but a side...kick, SIDEKICK!...political... IMPORTANT!" he finally blurtedwell most of his utterances could be classified as blurts but thiswas, in the words of archival TV's Ed Sullllivan, a *really big one*. "Rank! Army!"

At any rate the question (?) eventually proved to be in reference to *Colonel House*, paramount advisor to Woodrow Wilson. I'll bet you came close to guessing that. (Strange such a game can prove addictive. Way of showing off? How smart we are in decoding confusions? I suppose, but what do I know?)

"Well...we got there! Goodness!"the first time I had heard the chief display any impatience, but for some reason strange young people had begun hiving around, dressed in the latest fashions of sexuality and rankly wet from the rain.

At that time, I still held the memory of his knowing glance at me during the Babe Ruth episode, and felt my guilt both renewed and amplified, for I sincerely desired the approval of this large, gregarious man ever since I had witnessed the impromptu party at the Ole New England Inne (actually an Italian restaurant, mostly). As I shaved a hunk of Vermont cheddar and sipped white zindfandel at the bar, he bestowed small gifts brought back from England after his yearly trip to buy clothes. To be truthful, I profoundly envied the warmth the waitresses and the bartender revealed towards him.

Never unfortunately one of the boys, I nonetheless shared the raucousness at the immense vulgarity of a blowup rubber woman he fetched from his sportscar at the last, and which held a tray for drinks atop giant breasts. This prize went to Shorty the delivery boy, a man of sixty. I laughed, as the expression

goes, until I cried. But then wondered at my tears, as construction equipment gouged and roared nearby and my white wine vibrated in the glass, wondered what more there was to them. A loneliness wider and deeper than I had suspected. It had to be faced, of course.

As you can see I know no reason to spare myself: in the pursuit of degrees and minor honors, I should have become a better human being. No excuses.

At any rate I often marveled as to how he could be so educated and cultured and yet so daringly vulgar? And so so warmly open! I had observed him many times around the restaurant, huggykissy around the women, and like a ruddy locker room comrade around the men who, at least the ones rougher edged, called him all sorts of whoremongers and faggots. (The restaurant attracted a wide clientele.) Anyway, the whole ItalianColonial place brightened when he set a chubby foot inside. In his English shoes, of course.

And yet he remained a learned and cultured colleague in the sacrosanct confines of our library. Truly A Man For All Seasons.

I am a stick, as I said, inward, shy nerd who, given the chance, is liable to say the wrong thing in mixed company, or the right thing at the wrong time. Or to say nothing when all look to me.

Or, even worse yet, most often attempt to say nothing somewhat eloquently. Oh well. You know me I dare say. My name is legion, that lame, educated, legion of the perpetually half-fearful.

I therefore could never be like my librarian in the scene I often picture: large redchecked napkin tied round his neck to shield his tweeds from the lasagna and from the oversized goblet of ferociousCianti he gestures with, he's laughing with everyone. A little wine flings off the rim and hangs in vibrant air. *(For some reason, too, those red drops reappear to me from time to time, by themselves, abstracted from the convivial scene.)*

But...I'm happy enough. What life offers most of, I have had. Now much of it is over, with my wife ill. It comes to us all at some point, the hand impossible to play.

Anyway, the librarian had a perfectly lovely life, taking as it did from scholarship and epicurianism and warm friends.

Okay, you ask, where's the dark cloud?

In a shipment of television tapes. As far as I knew, not a modern electron ran about any instrument in the marble library--old books and index cards, and banker's lamps radiating dust down from cracked green shades. (Even the phones were those

black prewar thumpers which could withstand a direct bomb hit.)

Therefore had you popped in a few weeks ago after fifty years absence, you'd be pretty comfortable in the fact that nothing had changed, inhaling, ah, that venerable oaken fragrance. (But don't we need some such place in the fury and slash of our instant world?)

"There's a mistake." My heroic librarian kept smiling at the wiry trucker who was methodically piling the boxes of television tapes between them on the floor.

"Nope. And I leave it all here whether you sign or not. It's no skin off my nose. I do what they say. It's easier like that, believe me." The shame of it, and that's exactly the right word, is that this driver would never bring his son here, which I as small democrat lament--and yet the place is a treasurehouse for all the world, let alone this city. I guess I'd have to fault the chief librarian there. Oh there had been the occasional grammar school group herded in, but every citizen could have found something of value even latent criminals anent the exhaustive law holdings.

At any rate if you're excluded from something, or feel you are the same thing, no? it's virtually the same as being a criminal anyway. But there I go being hypercritical again trump card of the impotent.

The cartons stayed unopened while he tried to get the library board to remove them, visiting each member at his and her place of business. But, no go, since the governor himself had decided.

It seems that the silvery-sleaze media center of the capital had burned down--fast. (It had been named The Grafton Reece Center and was popularly known as *Graft n' Grease*). At any rate something called the MY MOTHER THE CAR FESTIVAL was rescheduled, instead, at our holy library! I felt the entire project had been conceived as a joke since I vaguely remembered the TV show as a weak one, but intense young careerists with bottlebottom glasses had mobilized behind it.

And they found little that was funny.

My last gastronomical view of the librarian was his snapping something to his favorite waitress, whom he called Beatrice, as to the quality of his veal parmigian: "Metallic cheese!" he sneered--so unlike him. Yet...he was right. The standards at our favorite restaurant were slipping, as soggy crackers in front of me on the bar testified.

Around this time, too, Cross Punks appeared with their hair, their walkmans and loose muscles. As you know and know from tabloid television, the boys dress as girls and vice versa as if anyone could tell. I believe they did all of the setting up of



the VCRS that the state, in the person of an earnestly demanding young woman, had delivered in a jumble of machines and cables. The grayheaded librarians would have nothing to do with her technology and those connected to it smacking of sin.

Presumably the Cross Punks checked out the tapes from the old show and watched the such activity comprising the "festival" actually they watched pornographic ones they had carried in.

I had no trouble with their playing with sexuality. After all, we had already gotten better acquainted in recent nights, my watching them on late night talk shows after my wife had lapsed into fitful sleep. Kids...that's all. They'd assume the role society expected of them sooner or later. Right now they could flaunt their hatred for the uptight rest of us. To tell the truth, the violence associated with their "movement" bothered me more. It always does, but it's always manifesting itself, and in all eras. Why in Sam Johnson's London, as an example, delinquents calling themselves Mohawks would thump the bejesus out of any stragglers between taverns.

The chief librarian had done his best to give some class to the *My Mother the Car Festival*, flanking the circulation desk with posters executed by a leading Japanese graphic artist, and showing a ghostly black and white collage of mothers of all races, along with foreground autos, mostly Ferraris of a walloping red. The kids giggled at the posters the same way they giggled at the confused questioner when he went into one of his vague dances. As a matter of fact, it was they who witnessed the one concerning Woodrow Wilson's Colonel House their very first day on board.

Oh wellfools of the old and new orders.

The vague man took to lodging in an empty alcove and muttering out the window at construction materials being unloaded across the narrow street. I joined him to see where a hole in the ground attested to the departure of THE INSTITUTE FOR THE NEW...whatever. Only a portion of the old sign stuck up from the dumpster. When they uncrated a greenish gold statue of Delilah cutting Samson's hair, I deduced we were in for another S & D Healthclub. This great leap forward in reasoning was followed by the huffing up of the chief librarian and the whole tribe of acned crossdressers carrying VCRS and monitors. "They have to come in here now!" he all but screamed. We didn't inquire as to why, hearing the sobs of an assistant librarian retching out somewhere in the middle bowels of the building.

We settled ourselves at a desk across from the kids and they ran a tape which popped up on the largest monitor. It showed what I took to be a French sailor. He wore a top of

horizontal red stripes and bell bottom pants, and everything about him was sunken, his chest, the hollows of his cheeks and eyes. Was he ill, addict, what? Then a Brunhilde rushed in and tore down the velcro front of those trousers and, of course, the extraordinary sprung forth, explaining the spavined look: all the energy had drained down into the thing.

*IT MADE HIM AN INTERNATIONAL STAR!* crowed the whiskey voice of former blond leading man Ty Merrick. Thousands went in the training of that voice, ravaged but still resonant even in that marble with its horrible acoustics where you couldn't hear the person beside you at

times a fortunate case now, since my vague desk partner launched into a Panglossian movie review, decrying the poor lighting would you believe? Ty's voice kept repeating, as did the whole fantastic vignette the kids had spliced the business into a loop. (Shouldn't our own stupid acts be depicted thus? the repetition'd help us truly see ourselves.)

Suddenly all the construction guys across the street shrieked and cheered at once, somehow catching a ghost image reflected back off the glass of a dusty print of Robert Fulton's steamboat on the wall above our heads.

The kids turned the monitor around for them while putting hands into each other's blouses and pants for our benefit, one young person staring and staring at me. The only look I've ever seen absolutely empty of emotion. Blank is too woefully inadequate an adjective.

The construction boys continued leaping up and down like loose electrons and I began encountering a monster headache.

This is when I, shy as I am, complained, and the entire "festival" was again moved, this time to the basement, and therefore I and the other resident bookworms didn't have to bear the ambivalent young anymore, nor hear the cheers of the construction workers. We didn't miss either; we worked on, our own small nonsense a barricade against the world I suppose.

Meanwhile the staff lurched into a public relations mode. This policy was instituted one bright afternoon by the chief librarian upon the advice of a local politician who promised to intercede with the governor insinuating that the librarian could perhaps do something for him someday. He also advised him there'd be more clout if the library became more visible, and that he'd therefore have to train his staff to greet the bound to widen public with some warmth.

My first intimation of profound change was a circle of the gray librarians surrounding what looked like a huge, florescent lime. This latter proved to be the sartorial version of the politician's advice in the person of the chief librarian in a

green leisure suit which looked like it had been cut with a machete. His pep talk lifted the other librarians off reserve and they positively radiated towards any request, later that afternoon hedging in the vague man who more brightly danced in their collective regard. His subject...well they never found out since smoke flew up the semicircular stairwells, packing the angled sunbeams, and we all observed the chief streak greenly past.

Upon return he burst "Practically a marijuana bonfire down there! But that's not the worst of it. Oh no!" Spastically fetching a piece of poster board and a black magic marker from beneath the main circulation desk, he made a sign reading NO SEXUAL INTERCOURSE ALOUD When he was taping it up over one of the nowstraggly My Mother the Car posters, I had to approach him. I knew he meant *allowed* and not *aloud*, and puzzled how such a literate man, however distraught, could make this mistake. The worst thing was that try as I might I could not make him understand, and thus the sign remained. I did hastily persuade him it was thank goodness closing time to join me for a drink at our restaurant.

Which...was gone. We picked our way atop a steaming heap to a bulldozer parked with its nose up. A whipping banner attached to it boasted S & D WEST WILL SOON JOIN S & D EAST! "No one told me. Why would no one tell me?" he repeatedly asked, stumbling through the autumnal vapors of his own voice, the leisure suit taking on a bronze patina in the smoky light.

"A hellish circle this," I sighed, knowing his love for Dante.

I stayed away from the library for a couple of days and then one late morning while I was serving my wife her herbal tea laced with a little cognac, in bounded my friend on her little TV. He still hadn't jettisoned the leisure suit which took on an unearthly green glow, or rather pulse, fitting the angry ambient of *CONFRONT!*.

Gary Withers, in that most damning of phrases *a local broadcast celebrity*, began by taunting him, "I understand you're trying to throw young people out of that fancy library of yours."

"We are open to all persons, all subjects, all research, all knowledge, but I don't have enough room for the material I"

Gary Withers interrupted him. "So many shows from that wholedumb era and you choose Car Mother! Why not Peter Gunn? At least there'd be decent music!"

But my friend could not be turned from his sterling selling job "...happy to see many more people, every man woman and child of the community...the library is our collective pride.

International reputation!" (What the appeal realized the following week was a trio of old maid retired schoolteachers, all blue hair and bounce: *We didn't know this place exISTed!*)

Gary Wither's other guest was a newly selfordained "Activist of Disgust": "What you *doin'* down there, man? We gonna open it to the people! Go down there and piss on the floors. Wake yo' ass up!" I could feel the chief librarian's heart seizing under that stupid suit. "Can't say piss and ass over the airwaves!" smirked Gary Withers.

In the only lucky break I can remember from this whole degrading time, that following week a chartered bus took the activist's group to the wrong institution, and they made their odoriferous statement at The Transportation Hall of Fame.

In the ensuing weeks the vague man took to hiding in the stacks. I think it was because the youngsters had taken a perverse interest in him, often performing little comedic scenarios imitating him and the chief librarian both of whom they depicted as surrealistically hyper and hopelessly confused.

The appearance of Buster Nevers, though, brought him out from the stacks. It all but overwhelmed me too. Buster, a few years past his retirement from the National Football League, established a massive presence in the lobby of the library, his own color and his beige Italian suit blending so magnificently with the rosy marble as to make the rest of us uncomfortable. But he too became quickly agitated when the vague man commenced asking him his oddly slanted questions, beginning "He kicked it and caught it! Another sport. Not football" and on and on...

"I don't have the least idea what you're saying! No *clue*, man!" Buster ultimately roared, and our old dithery friend turned on his heel and walked out the door forever, sucked into blinding, mercury noon.

"Welcome to Blitz Day!" announced Buster Nevers when he had gotten himself back together. The librarians huddled around, the chief still in the green leisure suit, alas much looser, the right breast featuring the sheen of a tomato stain that had probably come from a gobbled meatball sandwich after the television show.

Buster had a dual charge from the governor, to move kids and equipment to a new library opening in a shopping center, and to introduce a bar code system into the circulation process.

"Hello. How are you?" he observed the niceties several times as each kid departed, holding equipment under one arm and squeezing genitals with the other. "Now would your mother approve of that?" scolded Buster finally, which led to greater

excesses and some hyperbolic grunts.

"Well thank God that's over," sighed Buster as the last girl (?) turned round darkly from the brilliant doorway to give us the finger. "If a kid of mine...!" and he slammed an enormous fist into his looseleaf notebook. "But back to business..."

I couldn't help thinking that the knot of them resembled the scene when these same gray librarians surrounded the chief as he introduced his nowrusting green leisure suit to the literate public. But this time the confidence from the richly brown center of the group was fairly stinging the air: "Tomorrow we bring in the machines; today we learn three key words! That's all." I can't remember the words now, and they couldn't learn them then.

After a half hour, Buster turned to me as I pretended to browse through a drawer randomly extracted from the card index. "Am I a bad guy? Do I look like a bad guy to you?" I shook my head as the assembled librarians glazed. "Walls! I got walls here! Wellllll... we'll write it down!" He yanked a pencil from an inside pocket but it snapped in his hammy hand. All the librarians shrieked at once, bouncing echos about the marble lobby. "Whoa! I got another! Save the upsets for the big things. Please!" He handed another pencil to the oldest librarian, a lady as crushed and sunken as had been the French sailor, but with no latent potency of any kind.

He instructed her to write the number one on the reverse side of a Mother the Car poster, but she looked back with such fright that he gently transferred the pencil to the chief librarian. "Sir! Don't let us down in this! UnnnnnnnLESS it's some sort of joke? Did Lukey Maxwell out of the Cultural Affairs Office...?"

Our chief librarian held the pencil fiercely posed. "Well, never mind then. Do you suppose that you could make the number, the Romannumeral, one?" The chief librarian emitted a sort of highpitched mewling sound and attacked the poster with the pencil but...I don't know quite how to say this...couldn't bring the point in contact with it in order to write, instead slapped the pencil sideways again and again, the flat of the instrument that is, against the cardboard.

It sickened me, has ever since, and even as brusque as he was, Buster Nevers found tears in his eyes.

Chief turned to me, his face as loose as his green suit, and thrust the pencil towards his baggy throat. "Inside...press up! Up! Jam! Hard! Murmurder! What?"

"You're angry. Hurt. It's been...too much." I softly took the pencil.

"Yeah?" shouted the alarmingly reassertive Buster Nevers.

"Well it's all too much for me!"

As he stomped out I found the chief librarian practically in my armpit. "Crap TV," he began, "bar code shit...*horror* kids!"

"Yes."

"Where friends? Restaurant? Why? Presents. England! England!" his face ashen.

"That was grave. How they could sell out to developers with nary a word to you, I..."

"Scum politics, ugh!" he shuddered.

"Not a place for you or me. Not that we're pure but relatively we certainly are! Naive for sure. We can't sense the greasy wheels within wheels don't have a clue."

"My beautiful library and then then then smoking gggrass."

"Terrible."

"Fucking!" The other librarians left.

"I...don't know," I touched him. "You get comfortable and then the bills come in, and the dues must always be paid eventually. Anybody happy can't be left that way I suppose. Not for long anyway."

"Books?"

"Yes? Books?"

"No more," he sobbed, grabbing my arm, his eyes skidding beyond terror, the two of us fronting the ancient wooden cabinet. "No more books. There'll be no! Nowhere!"

His face went fishbelly white and seemed to be melting downward.

"Oh there'll be one or two left," I encouraged.

## The Three P's

"Well! Then! Who do we have here?" Turning a corner onto the sunporch, he played the upbeat young doctor but the "patient" proved to be a cauliflower sunk into the canvas seat of a wheelchair. C. Flower noted the chart hanging from a chrome arm.

"Is this the joke on the new hand?" he sniffed to the head nurse as they stood in her airless downstairs cubby. "Not exactly," she reached slightly into his jacket. "This belt buckle is so unusual. Difficult to undo?"--an old-fashioned nurse featuring starch noises when she moved.

Marched he to the hospital administrator, a person roundly comfortable without him. "Ah yes, you've gone and discovered C. Flower then? She has been a model patient." He managed it all in a sigh.

"She?" "We've gotten used to referring to her as a she. One thinks of cauliflowers as feminine, don't you think?" He had never thought about it and didn't now, the memory of nurse's noisy moves still fuzzing him. "Well now!" the administrator brightened, "You'd like an explanation!" In an immediate slash of dusty sunlight, his granny glasses opaqued on a pink face.

"I insist!"

"Of course, since she's your patient. Your others will be much more nettlesome, believe me."

"I'm not trained to treat..."

"Of course not. But, then again, we're not trained to do much that the world requires, are we?--the newer things especially. There's a...personal world, a professional world, and a political world. The three P's you might say."

His own personal world revealed itself in color photos of three little girls--the doctor could see the administrator's soft facial features in each. One black and white picture presented a woman--wife, the doctor deduced--with something like the administrator's blurry face too, plus strain, greeting a robed African. "My wife is also a physician. We are physicians. Like you." Behind the blank glasses no eyes were evident; the young doctor did not answer. "At any rate, C. Flower, was born in response to the political. As a kind of

joke at first. You see we have the minimal number of patients under state regulations. If we lose one, another must come in. Last month we lost one, and had no one to admit. They would close us down!" He waved a fat arm expansively, as if to include his wife and daughters among employees.

So, we admitted C. Flower. She's temporary-- 'll be chucked into the dumpster at the appropriate moment. At that point in time, I'll put her down as transferred to a private convalescent home," he sagely nodded to himself, his glasses only somewhat gummy in the office's quick darkening--slumberry gray eyes now visible. "Will it rain or what?"

"No. Not supposed!" the younger doctor snapped, sulked, recovered. "She's my...patient! How can I partake in such an an an immor...a crooked game?"

"Do be careful, Doctor. Many have lost professional standing by being pigheaded in these or similar circumstances. I'm asking you to be a mensch ! All life isn't diagnosis, treatment, and lab tests on stool samples."

"COMPLETELY absurd! I don't believe this!"

"My young friend, every institution forces one to perform absurd tricks," he stared over prayerful hands. "A kind of power dance. That is, the higher-ups conduct us with the most benign of smiles," he smiled, "and we dance. I guess it's how you use your baton in this world that counts, yes?...sort of joke." His wink stuck.

"Well not ME dancing! I'm going to HAVE to write a report before..."

"Don't bother. The inspector will be here in an hour or so, and want to talk to you as the new physician. Ah if done 'twere best done quickly! Everyone in the hospital, including you, out on the street! Including me--with three in college. And, God, the poor people in the kitchen! They don't just send resumes out like you can. Carlos is so proud of that cancerous Thunderbird!"

"No alternative! Such corruption defies everything!"

"Well, many things, I'll grant you that. Uh, well, more than a few anyway." The administrator, in ritual weariness, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes as the young doctor bolted.

That afternoon, the agrieved physician saw his clear duty as simply pointing things out to the skinny inspector--wanting to feel not responsible after that point. So on their walk to the state car, he merely stated "Before you leave I want you to meet C. Flower ."

"No thanks, I've seen enough."

"But, this is quite important."



"Hey! You're here to treat the Alzheimer's Brigade. More power to you, but I don't have to look at it and think of myself with the drool running down. No way!" The inspector would not be moved into the contrived scenario.

"But this particular patient is a cauliflower!"

"Hey! So you got a few vegetables here; I didn't know you differentiated."

"I really must insist!"

"Hey, Doctor! I'm really Finance." And, leaning over it like a mincing question mark, he opened his laptop computer and punched in a formula which blinked on the screen. "See that? This'll show them! My invention, and the whole system's gonna eventually use it if it kills me!"

After his shift (his relief, Dr Kong, giggled yes to all his complaints) and with his head abuzz with newer strategies, he headed to nurse's cubbyhole again, beginning to consider thinking about seeing her as his sole potential ally. At the least, he hoped she'd take a few moments to listen to reason.

Oh she'd try her discrete SEXY business--he wasn't naive--it still wrinkling his mind with alarming starch: as had the inspector defensively crunched his beloved NUMBERS, and before him, the administrator dispensed SCHMALTZ.

Personal, professional, and political indeed! A whole world of corruption.

He was fathoming, descending into her atmosphere, how he'd set up once again his moral heart.

## All a Dither

We all started avoiding him because he made us nervous. I had never thought of how to label his actions until my secretary says "This new printer dithers; I mean it's supposed to, fills out each little individual letter better that way."

"It cost enough! Dithers, hey? Like Dagwood's Mr Dithers in Blondie, hey?"

"Yeah," she winks, "or somebody else."

Well that somebody else was *our* Mr Dithers, so as his supervisor, I finally sweettalked him into early retirement. Well, I mean, you couldn't see him! He'd make you blink and blink.

On his last day we took him out to the best of the city's second tier of restaurants and our waitress squealed at him "Well look at you! Wow, you're the best one yet!"

"He sort of...dithers," I whispered.

"Yeah, right. Whatever. Everybody does, really. I see everybody's. Everything."

"No kidding. Mine too? I do? I have one?"

*"Sure! You should see a rose! Experience it! Awesome!"*

"Make sure Cookie doesn't overcook my steak." I wanted to make sure.

## Tug

Sees her in a construction bucket being hoisted up against the sun to a traffic light outside the dental school. Her darkly yellow helmet. Flees to Houston Hall where friends discover him shrunk into a triangularity of Espresso Cart, Arby's Roast Beef, and Philly Cheesesteak.

"She's here! My mother! Red light!" They convince him it's impossible, to lighten up.

Back to his room to fetch books for Political Science, he departs the dorm through a crew raking leaves. Checked flannel shirts, shafts of dusty sunlight. Her. Quite round and singularly benign, looking a bit like the pope about to bless with a glowing rake.

Jettisons books and papers, all, into the crunching leaves. Past his friends catapults hewho try to intersect *Hey!* Runs to exhaustion, then staggers onto the Philadelphia Art Museum's steps, collapsesat the top of which she's doing a Rocky imitation in capacious bra above boxing trunks of snaking irridescence.

His second wind cuts in and he bolts to the campus.

That evening the university opens a new folk center, and he, chosen by a student committee to give the address of welcome, introduces afterwards a troupe of mummers, designated a "Cowboy Comic Brigade." A sequenced twenty surround him, twirling ropes while performing the famous mummer's strut, a kind of zigzagging stompabout as if wearing snowshoes.

Lasso slaps his shoulder, flops round his head. Down to his waist. He doesn't look up.

## THE PROGRESS OF THE BREAST

"You're welcome, but it's Jerry. Mr Blenheim is my father." He had been thanked by Jill Ann Ilg for retrieving a rolling lipstick from under his computer table; its gold, he noted, matched the highlights in her chestnut hair.

"What with you being a vice president 'n all, well..." Miss Ilg was going on.

"Well here I'm the class dummy," he interrupted.

"Not while I'm around," Dr Monogham stagewhispered off to Jerry's right, his own computer screen rolling off calculations with wildly increasing decimal places. "I don't even know how I got into this stuff!" he laughed. "My business is words."

"I'm told it's all really numbers there, even when they turn it into words. Or the machine does...or something," shrugged Jerry, the vice-president, to Dr Monogham, this silvery, puzzled Irishman.

Dr Alfred, the Instructor, minced behind Dr Monogham to push the button to the frenzied monitor. "We shall let it work in the dark for the nonce, yes?" Jerry thought Dr Alfred's small hands were suitable to the work.

"Oh...nice! The dark!" Jill Ann teased them, that generic teasing appropriate to her age and station. Nonetheless, Jerry wondered if he blushed. Dr. Alfred slid back of the silver Dr Monogham to him, class dummy, self-proclaimed.

"Well, you've done it all right, Mr Blenheim. And in what? Twenty eight lines? Example of what we call Brute Force!" (The name too of a men's cologne Jerry recalled from some massive billboards.) "That is, you instruct the computer to do every bitty-witty thing, step by step, without taking advantage of the shortcuts of some minimal math. Therefore, Brute Force! But we need a bit of cunning in life, yes? Oh your program'd run as it's so laboriously set up, but why bother? I mean we all would've gone stark raving mad if your

way is the only way we could program computers, hey, Mr Blenheim?" Jerry managed to conceal only part of his disappointment as this too-emphatic and pursed-mouth teacher moved--step by tiny step--from the downcast vice president to most fashionably slim Jill Anne Ilg, who had littered the top of her console with makeup-stained tissues, the gold lipstick case standing up among them. She was using the screen as a mirror to neaten her blush. (Had he stressed *Mr* because the other two men in the room were PhDs? pondered Jerry.) Dr Alfred whistled. "Beautiful! Well, from Gattling Gun to poetry! Three-line program! Like a little poem, Miss Ilg! Wow! Run it! I think we have a computer natural here, gentlemen!"

How could she, she who wincing Jerry had seen exfoliating tissues and gum wrappers around the hallways and in the employees' cafeteria, brushing on her makeup while studying herself in her down-twisted rearview mirror when his company sedan crawled behind her weaving Subaru of a gray, dripping morning in the long line into the plant... how could she...?...with her high school education...when he...?

The class not insufferable enough, Dr Alfred proved to be one of these New Age instructors, for at the break he asked the three pupils to bring back anything from outside the training center which symbolized them in some way. Jerry went immediately to a shivering maple and picked up a fallen leaf. He would decide what to say about it when Dr Alfred asked, never having forgotten the words of his curt old mentor Pick Hallen, newly retired to Duck Key: "Throw the dart and then draw the bullseye around it."

"Whattayagot?" It was Miss Ilg, he knew from the one-word quality of the question.

"A mystery not ready to be revealed." And, palming the leaf, he turned round to fall in beside her, he in his bluegray suit, she her denim miniskirt, unsteady on her heels in the mid-morning thaw of the frosty grass. When they came to a stream, she insisted on trying to inch down the steep embankment to fetch a smooth red rock for the appraisal of the diminutive computer guru. She started falling, and reached back to Jerry who seemed abstracted, thrusting out his hand late.

Jill Ann in zigzag pellmell stumble finally slapped into the water and hit her head on a much larger rock than the one she had desired. Her dress flowed as best it could for its short length and blood trickled thinly into the current from her splayed-out chestnut hair. Jerry yelled and the nearby Dr Monogham, who had been digging up something with his toe, came running. Together they got her up onto the windy meadow, her head bleeding profusely by now, and Monogham ran to phone the

company ambulance.

"I saw you." Monogham sighed later at his machine. "You reached out for her but, alas, a second too late." He nodded to her computer, atop which artifacts remained, his white hair still aflame from wind and excitement.

Jerry felt his palms sweat, seeing that image of her small hand reaching to his own, and he nearly knew he had decided not to help her. Oh it was petty and cruel to punish her for outshining him in class, immature too--but he felt, if true, no one would ever know.

He glanced to Monogham in fear of being observed, of giving something away with his face. What he saw was a message blinking LOVE YOUR CROOKED NEIGHBOR WITH YOUR CROOKED HEART.

"That's not the program I'm working on," Jerry recovered.

"Shhh. Oh god I forgot you were a vice president. You caught me." But Monogham said it as if he had done the catching.

"I'm working on the poetry of Auden. Certain lines I mean." His blue eyes were blinking in rhythm to the green line on the screen. "It's a kind of hobby of mine, something to carry into retirement. This is the second time I've taken the course and I know all the solutions to the programming problems. So I sock them out in a minute or two and bring up Auden from another disc I've been working on."

"How about that mess of numbers earlier?"

"Little red herring," Monogham smiled thinly. "He doesn't know I took the course before, Dr. Alfred--nor much of anything else. Why, I bet he even forgot where he parked his butterfly."

"I see," Jerry saw in his way. "But, whatever, he does know something about comput..."

"Company money wasted? Is that what you're thinking?" Monogham's eyes became a stiller, icier blue.

"Not necessarily. My management style, so-called, allows a little elbow room. Auden's poetry might just help the company somehow in some obscure way, that is you become a broad...and and happier employee and thus...if I'm not stretching it too..."

"Broad?" winked Monogham. "That word on your mind is it? Or on mine?"

They both became momentarily embarrassed. Looking down to notebooks on his desk, his forehead shading beyond its baby pink, Dr Monogham yelled "She's in Mercy hospital but she's all right." The comment was directed too at Dr Alfred who shrieked over the phone.

"But her purse is here I tell you!" The voice on the other end of the phone was loud enough for the two men at their computers to hear a verbal shrug. "Oh I'm so glad that she's

okay," Jerry whispered. "If I wasn't so damn slow...even at this." He waved an arm at his computer. "Both symptoms of age I guess."

"You get it faster than anybody else I've seen take this course."

"Oh? Miss Ilg wrote a three-line program that accomplished what took me twenty eight!"

"Her bodyfriend's in Systems!" Monogham slammed his notebook closed, not in anger for he smiled merrily. "He wrote the program out on a notecard. That's what all the crap is on top of her monitor. She had to find it. Dug it out from all the noxious crap in that Black Hole of Calcutta purse of hers."

"She cheated? Why? It's...not the purpose of the program... and there are no grades or anything like that. I don't get..." Jerry was slowly, genuinely, shaking his head.

"No stakes at all. Not really. Some time off from the routine and maybe the exposure to personal computers and dummy-programming'll help you down the line."

"So why cheat?" Jerry repeated the question as if it embodied a profanely tragic mystery.

"Habit. That's the difference between the generations I think. They cheat habitually." Monogham lent his voice a scraping resonance: "We always had a dark, darrrrrrrk reason for doing so."

"We're better, not worse. You make it sound..."

"Initially we're all of us just scared I guess, but after a few dozen times its just a way we've learned to behave. Programmed, if you will." Monogham typed ROMANTIC US!!!!!!!!!!!!!! NIHILISTIC THEM!!!!!!!!!!!!!! "Wouldn't Jill Ann Ilg be just astounded to know she was nihilistic?"

"Are you...from Personnel?"

"Guilty. But you don't have to be afraid. I can't haul you in for any tests or evaluations, only the secretaries and low level engineers and other clerks of such subterranean ilk."

"I'm not afraid." Then Jerry laughed. "Actually I was for a ridiculous moment." After he gushed this last it surprised him that he could be so intimate with a stranger; Monogham somehow brought him out, and not solely because of his vague guilt over Jill Ann Ilg. (How hurt, really, could she be? he had been asking himself.) "I forget I'm an exalted vice president sometimes. I feel that's healthy for me, to forget that is. Thus I didn't mind being the class dummy--even in dummy-programming!--a kind of double indemnity." Jerry found his own humility disarming, warming.

"Ah but you did mind. You didn't want to. That's not quite the same" winked Monogham. "And the recently battered

Miss Ilg was, of course, really the class dummy--unless you think it bright of her to get the quick routes from her boyfriend."

"But how do I handle it administratively?" Dr Alfred squealed, hopping a little, her absence assuming near federal proportions.

"Old Brute Force there," nodded Monogham, "can't get the message and can't handle it when he does." The voice on the other end of the phone attempted to reassure Dr Alfred. These two at their monitors remained content to be without their teacher, both manfully on station even though somewhat wet from the rescue of the academically fickle Jill Ann.

"You may have a point there, uh, my partially not wanting to mind being class dummy," Jerry allowed, a bit more archly than he intended. "Any, uh, more secrets about me?"

"Just that I thought I saw you hesitate...that you had a chance to grab her?"

"No way! Just too damn slow I told you!"

"Well maybe you're not that sure. Maybe a...more of a mixed picture in your head than that. Our motives can befuddle us at times. And at so many times we only have an instant to..."

"I can assure you that I...!"

"Well, chalk it up to my usual distrust, nothing personal. I guess it's that I should love my crooked neighbor with my crooked heart. Uh, well, you're my honest neighbor so nothing applies to you." Monogham pressed a key combination and his screen blanked. "God look at my hair! That wind was a mixmaster out there during the emotional mission of transporting the maiden ever upwards from the water, the white-haired elder and the heroic chieftain. Sounds like a myth."

"I'm not Goody Twoshoes, believe me," Jerry was fretting, a sort of chemical smell coming off Miss Ilg's spent tissues. It annoyed Jerry almost as much as Monogham's wild hair and pseudo-literary nonsense.

"All right then, I'll believe you, Jerry--if I may truly call you that--when you can't believe yourself. At any rate she's not the angel who couldn't quite fly down the embankment, and you're not quite the devil who programmed the chaotic results from his graybeard experience. And I am not the assured professional since I was afraid that you as a vice president'd report my fudging the computer course with my work on Auden's poetry. A kid's feeling, isn't it? Afraid of being told on.

"Thus and so we are our calculating selves and we are our driven selves and we are our unknowing and confused selves trying to do something right as we see it and not seeing it for



vast stretches at a time...." To Jerry, Monogham could have staunched this breathless collation of "insights" at any time.

And Dr Alfred should take hold and resume the class! Monogham sucked up a quick breath, going on to "...and often figuring something out much too late after all the hurt...and always always always capable of doing something petty and cruel, not planning it or anything but when the situation arises...?" The effort cost him a scarlet face.

"Guilty--at least in some of that...rush I would guess, but not in the situation of the lately unfortunate Miss Jill Ann Ilg--or should I say Ms Jill Ann Ilg? Say, are you a psychologist?" Jerry wondered too--resting an elbow on the keyboard, his screen thereby sporting a repetitive garbage--if Monogham was a drinker.

"Yes."

"That why the line about...or rather lines about..."

"I know I run on. Anyway...what I perceived. I don't maintain it's right. I talk to get a fix on things. What counts for you is your view."

"No, no, I...was just slow in grabbing her. That's tragic enough. I'm at the point where I might have to move fast soon. Make the right decision or it'll be made for me. I might have to leave...choose to leave the company." He was giving Monogham too much; Dr. Brute Force still babbled over the phone.

"My! Worried is it? That's as close as you'll ever come to a revelation I do believe! Oh good! I made you laugh! By the bye, in the office presidential sweepstakes pool, odds on you are dead even."

"Hmph. No kidding? Better than I deserve." That's an odd word to choose--I deserve to be president."

"That's the spirit!--for you."

Late that afternoon they met by chance in the hospital gift shop, and then proceeded to the elevator. The same plastic package of carnations in each right hand, they ascended.

"I was so stupid and awkward," Jerry began in her unlit room as Jill Ann sat upright in the bed while smoothing down the powder blue shorty nightgown on her slim thighs.

"You were nice. And you're nice now so that proves it!" She tossed her head slightly, the blond highlights now dim strawberry. He was stopped by her comment, standing by the widow and observing the glossy traffic in the blue light outside while puzzling over how such a sweet logic could square with her cheating in the course.

"What they had left. Why we both got the same." Dr Monogham, jerking as if sexually possessed, his voice climbing an octave, shoved his flowers right atop Jerry's on the bedside

table, next to the tissue box. Jerry saw a lovely, very young girl with thin, almost boyish legs.

Strangely, the blue light from outside intensified, blooming. This is where she laughed, throwing herself back on the bed, and when he experienced a moment which would come back, standing at the window and hearing the laughter and seeing the light in that room, sniffing the slight aroma of past-fresh carnations from the sealed boxes...her starting to turn towards him, the sheer nightgown of an almost-white blue, and under it a breast shadowy and yet faintly creamy, the dark dark nipple the color of a black cherry.

The next month the board in a surprise move selected him as president, and the laughter and much else abruptly ceased, though the image of that breast persisted. Whether studying blueprints on the plant expansion he was shoving through, or walking Clancy, their Springer Spaniel, through the snow and soot park near the condo, the breast would hove into view, creamy white and lovely.

Once it superimposed on one of his wife's as she awaited his tennis serve during a stolen short weekend in Florida. She rocked side to side; the breast followed. "What are you waiting for?" Carla snapped, puffing her black hair from out of one eye, "Inspiration?"

Both of them panted under the lid of one dark, humid cloud, his ears hammering, his eyes diffuse and hers darkly fierce, the top of the net assuming an unearthly white glow. At his further delay she announced "And you'll never beat me again!" A year into the obsession he reasoned it would help to see Jill Ann, but was too hedged in by flunkies when he dropped by Maintenance, and he couldn't get to the Dispatch Section with any grace.

Once some whimsey entered in at the wedding of Treasurer Peter Lapides' daughter: the breast swathed in a Virgin Blue playing peek-a-boo behind the brocaded chief priest--no hint of flesh revealed, though, not even in pinpoints.

Some vague time after that, Carla rented Citizen Kane in order to disprove its claim as the greatest American film. Jerry was busy with papers in his home office and the only fragment he overheard was an old character musing on a youthful sighting of a girl in white on the Staten Island Ferry, saying that never a day went by that he didn't think of her. He slid the Treasurer's preliminary report towards the green-glowing desk lamp and softly moaned.

On his next walk with Clancy while fleeing a condominium dispute, one faction of which was spearheaded by his wife, the dog's eyes pleaded as Jerry addressed the beautiful image

lurking in the bluegreen gloaming above the first snowdrops to break bud that sopping spring.

The breast was this time a peach-and-cream confection, stock still as the wind began throwing itself around the sky.

But no amount of warning or of fierce concentration would free him, so he concluded "Your gumcracking Venus! Just...work harder! You're lazy!"

"Damn Fraud!" he excoriated himself while yanking the leash as he spun round. Clancy whimpered back to him, the wind slamming both their voices together.

"Love your crooked neighbor, hey Clance?" he queried the dog while removing his leash, the sound of the acrimonious meeting penetrating his walls from the nextdoor apartment of the eminent gynecologists Spirungold. "Actually she was built like a boy! Pipecleaner! Can you imagine? Me with my taste for the bulbous in that strangely opposite sex! That that little breast that haunts this middle-aged ass was hardly bigger than a boy's! would you believe? I'll...have to give in soon and see a shrink." Clancy scrabbled away to his bowl of gaseous-smelling dogfood; the resigned Jerry, still bent over with leash in hand, noted Carla's whining intonation from next door. "Oooops...she's beginning to smell blood," he whispered.

Nearly a year later at Personnel's sedate, candlelit retirement dinner for Dr Monagam and three others, held on a wintry, stinging- white night when most events were cancelled, the two men joked about computers while standing under a homemade banner attesting THE PIONEERS.

"I didn't know they'd get to run my whole life! How've you been doing with...Frost was it?" Jerry asked, knowing it was a mistake, that Dr Monagam would know he remembered the poet had been Auden.

"Remember whatsherface, Joanne? Practically naked in that hospital!" Monogham elbowed, his face firing up with Scotch, his eyes like blue water. By this point in Jerry's mental life, the breast had, of course, almost completely abstracted itself from that lateafternoon in Jill Ann's hospital room, but the whole cream and blue scene began assembling, even to the odors of the carnations.

"No, can't say I remember."--but why should the president play? Let the others play he chided himself. This bold thought propelled him to want to tell of the haunting breast, since he couldn't, finally, submerge it the way he always had everything else internally disquieting. Besides, Monogham had already gotten to resemble, in The Town and Country's flickering isle of candle glow against what had become an outside blackness, windswept and thrillingly cold, a benign priest

behind the confessional grill.

But he could not so confide, especially as president: Discretion always had to be the other side of that coin.

"Auden! I remember it was, something about all of our crooked hearts. Well I've met a few of them in the ensuing years. And Jill! uh, Jill Ann was the girl's name."

In his mind he heard Monogham saying "Give us this day our daily breast, hey?" and he held his breath in the waxy smell, then released it in self-congratulation as candle flames bent horizonally when the draft carried the funereal smell of bouquets paid for by the various departments.

He hadn't seen a psychiatrist--too risky as he calmed the many palace disturbances, forcing early retirements in the process. "I'm getting the young people ready. They must take responsibility earlier," he reported to the board. "They simply make too much money just to stand around and watch. This passivity becomes habitual, and when we do let them step forth they're all but infantile. The chieftainship problem in this country is the prolonged wetnursing of its youth! And there also must be some, uh, more women," he weighed in with an afterthought.

But he finally did get his chance to tell someone. At a special seminar for the board and a few shareholders and an officer or two with facts and figures, at Blackwater Falls in West Virginia. He had trudged back to the lodge with a group after again witnessing the breast, this time adrift ghostly white through brownish fog in back of the dark, falling water.

Intoned the guide back then, a fuller-figured woman, "This whole valley was covered over, bridged actually, with thick thick rhododendrum. The Indians walked on top, and panthers...in the darkness black as a cave underneath...what? What do panthers do? Slither? Moved with no sound anybody could hear on top I would guess."

"Don't fall in, that's all," quipped Rissley of Accounting. "In the primal, eeeeevil dark the panther's eyes are fires of desire!" added 'Belly' Lauder of Publications.

Even though his shoulders mysteriously pained him terribly once back at the lodge, Jerry fetched his mini computer from his attache case and punched out a little piece of adding machine tape which he then left for conference coordinator Maureen Persky at the desk: WHATS BELLY DOING HERE?

Turning round to resume his sunken way to dinner, he encountered his old mentor arriving and they left Pick's bags to go for a walk. The obsession burst from him on a white oak bridge fairly swimming in moonlight. He walked to and fro through the vapors his frantic words had left.

"Nearly two years. That long?" the seated Pick asked softly from a shadowy nest of worn-smooth clothes. "Well, now you've given it to me you can forget it. It's mild stuff, Mr President. Everybody has more demons than that. Things, uh, visit me...uh, even at my age. Anyway, you can really get on to the job now. Without this...you can really get on with it. Get rid of even more deadwood at the plant! You got the guts for it. I can tell how wearing it's been--even without this floating...thing. Hey, I don't know..." and here Jerry winced-- people who sought to help him always managed to say too much-- "there's a pain in what we do, much of it, a cost. We get married, we...work. Nobody gets off scot free. You seemed crazy to yourself but it's just life." Pick lit a cigar just when clouds started past the moon. As the far sound of the falls washed into shuddering breezes astringent with pine, Jerry sat down next to him. The men remained some buffeted moments in warm silence.

The moon reasserted itself brighter and larger and Jerry felt love for Pick, who immediately rose and started walking back to the lodge, his body looking bent and all but crushed by moonlight. The glow of the receding cigar tip reminded Jerry of some vague something but he never saw the breast again.

## The Experiment

She is given an entire life in four hours though programing with accelerated hormones, will die of lung cancer at equivilant thirtyone.

I arrive, late, missing the birth and more, but get to observe her gangly first kiss. Sweet. The boy too.

When she proved a whiz at math I applauded, the roboteacher

waving clawfuls of A-papers, but then in college she wrote politically correct poetry, wretched by any standard, usually beginning something like

The pigs decline  
to sniff the slime

and ending in the wimpiest pseudointellectual "romance."

Your own aroma  
redolent of these  
thesis-innocent lovers

intertwined like leaves  
of ancient, neglected vines.

I wanted to scream: *Stop wasting precious time on this blather! There are always modes. Think! Forget what all the asshole careerists say! Embrace yourself and your ideas!*

I guess she was a bit sexually slow, quarter hour or so anyway, and I couldn't watch at first, uh...well I'm shy at any rate, and the knowledge she would die in ten years...well, a couple of hours actually.

I could sense he was a nice young man, though a bit macho-mouthy, and I started crying. I didn't need that.

My section leader laughed to the other ones about me and the lovers. "Such an old-fashioned display all round! Let me tell you I wouldn't trade our dropofthehat fucking for anything! Drop of the PANTS anyway!" she always topped herself.

I wasn't required to watch our young woman die though the muddy Xrays remain in my consciousness, slapped up for viewing too fast to really discern. The section leaders had ordered in beer and wanted to get to it; me, I couldn't wait to dive back into my TVBowl.

"You've seen pure science!" my section leader crowed as I left.

Why is it always so unsatisfactory?

## The Singing Wire

Jerry found the toy in the old bureau just as the phone rang in the frozen attic, a Boy Bombardier Set with cross-haired scope, and wooden bomb the size of a penlight battery.

"How nice to hear from you!" he told Ben. I hope you and Renata are cozy on this ferociously white evening. I'm up in the attic and it looks like a Christmas card down there on the street. Am I breaking up by the way? little portable phone." The Boy Bombardier toy in one hand, he held the phone in the other, its vibrating antenna forming and reforming a ghostly fan among the large wet flakes pasted on the window. "I can hear you fine," Ben answered, "It's a shame you can hear me." Instead of following up his puzzling remark, Ben shouted "Alone with all the memories in the attic, huh? I don't know if that's good or bad! Sorting out things, what to throw away what to...?"

"You got it! I only started moving in my stuff a few hours ago but already I find I can't live with the clutter Mom did. But, you were about to say something else...?" Silence from the other end as snow hissed through a cracked pane, topping a little pyramid on the sill.

Jerry wondered about the phone, shook it. "Ben?" he questioned. Red air darkened in the attic.

"Whoa! Don't shout. I'm here! Just had to find a way... tell you Jerry...uh, sit down on a stair or something and, yes, let's do cease the small talk."

Jerry put the phone and the toy on a dusty cardboard box and then dropped a hand down a few inches behind him, bent at the knees to lower himself into a sitting position on the threadbare oriental. He took his time: what could it be that he had not already heard in a lifetime of work?

Ben waited for the exertion to stop, and then said "Sorry to be bearer of these tidings, especially since your mother has so recently... Anyway, Jerry, the short and dirty of it is you're out. It's just a question of when. Hirwatari Industries has taken over." Jerry's racing heart made the reddish snowlight bloom colder. "Hirwa...never heard of..." he managed to whisper, his white shirt ballooning in a draft, floating in the inclined mirror atop the knobbylegged Victorian dresser--the drawer still thrusting out which had held the toy.

"Yeah, Charlie Garrity sits on both boards, in Boston and in

Kyoto--a real frequent flier. He tipped me. They're mostly in Brazil and Argentina is why you never heard of them, and of course Japan. Chief lawyer, believe it or not, was one Hector Gozales from Rio. Anyway, Charlie said you should start bargaining now for pension. They promised to give you golden handshake but the amount of gold depends on you." Outside, more snow wheeled from out of a purpling sky, almost obscuring the streetlight. Sleet ticked against the old house. "Expect it to take a good long time the way the Japs bargain." Ben's voice, quieter, seemed itself to tick. "They know we're mostly in a hurry and they exploit that."

Jerry stared at his hand, scored from the rug. He managed to gather himself. "Well I, I don't have to squeeze the last cent. My Jookie is well launched into his own career now and my ex is remarried. So I'm the old bachelor...middle-class-rich almost."

"I should be so fortunate," laughed Ben, "still a few mouths to feed, and two in college you don't hear from except for money! Hey I've been trying to extract from my own company for good and proper reasons. Golden handshake? I'll take a brass one, anything! But, never mind me! Hey, you'll do all right, but it's still awful. Hellyou only gave that company a life! That's all. Is Jookie still the baseball player?"

"I don't think so. Can't do that forever."

"Too bad. But anyway, Jerry..." Ben was trailing off at the other end until a stronger tone suddenly asserted "Hell in my company we're only a quarter or so Japanese owned! And don't believe these stories about these extraordinary Japanese managers. The firm runs on in the same incompetent way. The only difference is that we were actively incompetent under Harley Olchuff and now under the simplistic Ryo, so lately rammed into place, we are passively so." Jerry was half-listening, trying to clamp the pain. A door banged somewhere in the drafty interior of the house. "Listen to this, Jerry! I tried to sell Pecky Warren of Rich industries in Buffalo, and he told me to come back in three months 'cause they were way over inventory? Well let me tell you about the soft way my Japanese supervisor treats what he regards as failure by repeating it: *Way over inventory, ah yes. Way over inventory, ah yes.* Then the last time he says it, for that particular day I mean, he laughs like it's the greatest joke ever, you know?"

Jerry hadn't heard it all but offered "Inscrutable" his voice resonating with the raking sleet.

"Inscrutable my ass! Just another way of grinding your balls. I'll take old spastic Harley's hopping and yelling and screaming anytime. Besides, everything is business is scrutable



really. Too much so." And later that odd form, *scrutable*, rasps Jerry's mind amid the shuddering waves of sleet and hail and snow. The little toy with its tiny wooden bomb still rests on the cardboard box, and Jerry can't reconstruct, eyes jammed shut, whether the Japanese ships were depicted flatly on a sheet of cardboard or had been small wooden models. But when he opens his eyes, a tiny ship flickers, made three-dimensional by the threads of the old rug. It vanishes but has delighted him in his sadness, his childhood imagination returning somehow. He clicks on the brute of a floorlamp, and the sudden yellow light makes the attic look more ancient and mellow, more deep along its shadows, and smell more sharply cold.

When he looks through the bombsight at the lamp, the lenses are gummy, the crosshairs inside fuzzy. He breathes on the lenses and pulls out his shirttail to wipe them. Snow splotching blue-black against the window, his shadow becomes an agitated monster when the tiny bomb suddenly falls to the floor. Jerry looks up to see the figure of a boy crossing the drifted street. He can hear faint crying, and holds his breath to listen, willing his huge shadow to stop vibrating.

The snow under the streetlamp swings to become a vector connecting their pain, traveling each to each as if along a singing wire.

Jerry turns the scope around, trying to see the diminutive figure against the snowrush. What looks back, haloed by fuzz, dotted by frozen tears, is his own young, gold face. He fumbles and drops the scope, and the boy is gone. Jerry's heart seizes and then fairly bursts. Soon he's punching numbers on the phone, his fingers speckled by sweat. Outside the plow rumbles by.

"Be home!" Jerry shouts. No rings are audible at the other end.

But Jookie has heard his voice. "Dad? I...I thought you were really tied up by Grandmom's estate."

"Jookie!" he cries in that old masters' glow of the attic, the bureaus and tables and boxes suffused by dusty lamplight and appearing to swim inside their shadows, the sound of the snowplow receding to a whisper. "I don't know how even to ask: but what can I do for you? Is there anything, Son? Is there anything?"

